

## Revisiting Ronchamp and its Interpretations

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*Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp has been the subject of many interpretations. It is an intriguing building that I come back again and again thinking about architecture as I practice and teach it. Many interpretations implicitly reveal that it is a very difficult building to understand as to how it was conceived yet its experience is so clear. It has been seen as many things from mannerism, playful sculpture, to an expression of archetypal structures of perception. Revisiting some of its interpretations is a study worth undertaking for anyone who practice and / or teach architecture as one finds the building is still a great source of material for what it means to think and interpret architecture. In what follows, I will focus on three particular interpretations of Ronchamp that position themselves in three distinct interpretative frames. One sees Ronchamp as an expression of Le Corbusier's inner metaphysics, one approaches the building from within architectural history of styles and vocabulary, and one that aims at its genealogy and design process. While acknowledging the value of these interpretations as studies in design process and architectural vocabulary, I argue that none of these frames are helpful for us as architects and teachers to understand Ronchamp as a work of architecture that does what it does so clearly in its lived experience.*

### Introduction

Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp has been the subject of many interpretations. It is an intriguing building that I come back again and again thinking about architecture as I practice and teach it. Many interpretations implicitly reveal that it is a very difficult building to understand as to how it was conceived yet its experience is so clear. It has been seen as many things from mannerism, playful sculpture, to an expression of archetypal structures of perception. Revisiting some of its interpretations is a study worth undertaking for anyone who practice and / or teach architecture as one finds the building is still a great source of material for what it means to think and interpret architecture.<sup>1</sup>

Prominent art historian Ernst Gombrich muses on Braque's words in seeing Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*: "it is as if you asked us to drink petrol."<sup>2</sup> His response is that "but art is an acquired taste and I confess that actually I have come to like drinking this petrol -the so-called experiment of cubism, which started with

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1. Interpreting architecture as a disciplinary question is beyond the scope of this study. I rely on first-person lived experience as a highly powerful tool that we all have and use to interpret architecture. "The ability to read architecture - to interpret a building's conceptual resonance - is something we do intuitively as part of our everyday lives as we negotiate the labyrinth of our built environment with the tread of legibility that personal experience provides." Singley P. *How to Read Architecture: An Introduction to Interpreting the Built Environment*. New York: Routledge, 2019, 5.

2. Gombrich, E. H. *The Image and the Eye*. Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982, 242.

this picture."<sup>3</sup> Each encounter with an artwork is to be understood as a new event and each artwork demands from the subject its spontaneous fulfillment; the communicative fulfillment before imposing an interpretative frame on to the work. Kuspit reminds us that thinking the art object within pre-established thought has inherent difficulties. He emphasizes that a critical apparatus formed to analyze particular works may not be adequate for other works and may be an obstacle for the critics, creating an "inability to see the 'otherness' of the work -that is, its distinctness as a product separate from their own systems or ideologies."<sup>4</sup> He points out that evaluative concepts should be drawn from the experience of the work itself, and not from one's own attitudes toward art.<sup>5,6</sup>

Mies van der Rohe, in response to a question on what he thinks about Ronchamp, claimed that: "it is a very beautiful thing, but not architecture."<sup>7</sup> Mies's response says more about his own understanding of architectural design than about what Ronchamp offers in its experience. Curtis points out similar responses from architects when they visited Ronchamp:

"When architects and critics flocked to Ronchamp in the mid-1950s to see the finished building, they returned home with mutterings about 'a new Baroque' or 'a descent into irrationality'. Nikolaus Pevsner, the historian who had written *Pioneers of Modern Design*, was puzzled by what he took to be a departure from the true way. Stirling wrote of 'the rationale and the initial ideology of the modern movement being mannerised and changed in a conscious imperfectionism. Ronchamp was contrasted with the supposed 'rationalism' of the architect's earlier works and with the mechanistic precision and industrial standardization of American modern architecture of the 1950s, especially that stemming from the example of Mies van der Rohe. These reactions perhaps tell more about the preoccupations of the period than they do about Ronchamp."<sup>8</sup>

These sentiments of an era of modern architects and historians reflect a lack of openness to the plasticity of architectural design, a biased commentary on Ronchamp as an architectural object. Accordingly, Ronchamp is conceived as a break in Le Corbusier's architecture. However, as Curtis underlines: "it had roots in the artist's early paintings, sculptures, buildings and urban schemes, as well as in his analysis of a number of vernacular and monumental structures from the distant past."<sup>9</sup> It is true that Ronchamp is in a sense significantly different from the earlier works of Le Corbusier as to its overall form; nevertheless it is a continuation in his design research in the sense that it exposes similar formal strategies. Ronchamp pursues the same architectural ideas within the same understanding of architecture, albeit in a different sense of plasticity. Colquhoun underlines that, for Le Corbusier, architecture

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3. Ibid.

4. Kuspit, D. *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984, 11.

5. Ibid, 8.

6. Similarly, Chee underlines the otherness of the work: "...something 'other' happens if we recount occurrences without embellishment or prior assumptions, trying to make sense of what we encounter but cannot fathom, an sticking to 'only what we know', without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself." Chee L. *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces*. London: Routledge, 2023, 2.

7. Kortan, E. *Mimarlıkta Özel Yaklaşımlar-2: Ronchamp Tapınağı*. Ankara: METU Press, 1977, 1.

8. Curtis, W. J. R. *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*. London: Phaidon Press, 1995, 178.

9. Ibid.

was a matter of creating states of mind and even on the notion of standardization in architecture; his conception was significantly divergent from that of his contemporaries.<sup>10</sup> "For Le Corbusier, the problem was to standardize only certain elements with highly specific functions, falling under the category of 'equipment', and leave the architect free to arrange these elements according to artistic principles and within an envelope that need not be fixed a priori."<sup>11</sup> Le Corbusier himself is very clear on his conception of architecture:

"The business of Architecture is to establish emotional relationships by means of raw materials. Architecture goes beyond utilitarian needs. Architecture is a plastic thing. You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build houses and palaces. That is construction. Ingenuity is at work."<sup>12</sup>

"But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: 'This is beautiful.' That is architecture. Art enters in."<sup>13</sup>

The plasticity of Ronchamp as a way of creating and communicating states of mind is not different from that of his early works. Ronchamp is a new experiment in Le Corbusier's continuous design research into creating particular experiences through plastic form making.

### Ronchamp as a Symbolic Inscription

"It is in fact likely to lose sight of the work of art as such and to consider it a record of something more important than the work itself."<sup>14</sup>

"The question is never once broached whether a psychologically sound Baudelaire would have been able to write *The Flowers of Evil*, not to mention whether the poems turned out worse because of the neurosis."<sup>15</sup>

Childs, admitting his work belongs to the realm of speculation, sets forth to interpret Ronchamp through a constructed insight into Le Corbusier's cosmological belief system. Scrutinizing various phases of his life, he traces different events to construct a picture of Le Corbusier's individual metaphysics. Mentioning some symbols that he derives from this supposed cosmology, Childs argue that:

"Nor was his use of spiritual symbolism limited to Le Corbusier's paintings. The Sun and the Moon, numerically represented by the Triad and the Tetrad, figure throughout Ronchamp as their sum, seven, which according to Pythagoras represented the union of man and divinity. If one examines the plan of Ronchamp from south to north, the outline of a human head looking east is discernible, but orient the plan north to south, and the roof line of the southern facade produces the unmistakable horn motif of the

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10. Colquhoun, A. *Modernity and the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989, 163.

11. *Ibid*, 178.

12. Le Corbusier. (1923). *Towards a New Architecture*. Oxford: Butterworth, 1989, 151.

13. *Ibid*, 153.

14. Hauser, A. (1959). "The Philosophy of Art History". In *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*. E. Fernie (Ed.). London: Phaidon Press, 1995, 209.

15. Adorno, T. (1970). *Aesthetic Theory*. London: The Athlone Press, 1997, 8.

Taurus paintings. Perhaps Le Corbusier meant us to discover this for ourselves when he wrote in his commentary on Ronchamp: ‘Counterpoint, and fugue -music -grand music, undertake to look at the image upside down, or turn them a quarter angle. You will discover the game.’”<sup>16</sup>

Childs’s interpretation seems to be a reader oriented one. Umberto Eco, in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, underlines the differences between three kinds of interpretative attitudes: the reader, the author, and the text oriented approaches. And he also underlines the distinction between interpreting and using a text.<sup>17</sup> Eco’s discussion focuses on literary texts. However, his notion of ‘internal textual coherence’ applies to understanding of any hermeneutic unity. “The internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.”<sup>18</sup> An architectural object creates this unity in the precise calibrations of its plans, sections, overall volumetry, tectonics, and materiality. The result is the particular first-person phenomenal experience that the architectural object offers.<sup>19</sup>

The plan configuration of Ronchamp, when taken in isolation as pure graphics, may be associated with some cosmic figures as Childs suggests. Those cosmic figures though are not in the architectural experience, they are not part of the consciousness of the subject as she moves through the chapel. The plan, rather than indicating its independent existence as being merely a graphic inscription on the surface of the land, constructs and controls the gestures of the subject: entry, movement, thresholds, sight, light. The plan is the matrix that enables the particular experiences with its control over the other elements of the third dimension and accompanying qualities of light and materiality. And these experiences are not arbitrary to suggest that they may be the result of a totally different generator as when the plan is taken as a cosmic inscription in isolation from the other elements of the chapel. We may even suggest an analogy with playing chess through forms as the basis for the plan decisions, to construct experiences pregnant with particular states of mind. In other words, internal coherence of the architectural text does not indicate a significance of a human head, or another figure as the generator of Ronchamp’s plan.

Childs’s quotes Le Corbusier as the architect reflects back on Ronchamp in his monograph to support his cosmic reading:

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16. Childs, A. “The Fearful Mirror of Apollo”. *Interstices 4: Journal of Architecture and the Related Arts* (1996), 4.

17. Eco, U. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 67-88.

18. *Ibid*, 64-65.

19. “Philosophical hermeneutics offers an intellectual ground of great relevance for architecture. At the heart of this study is an understanding of architecture as fundamentally interpretive. Architecture interprets human life or human action. The built work resulting from this interpretation is in turn interpreted in its reception by those who inhabit it.” Faulder S. J. *Philosophical Hermeneutics and The Architecture of Alvaro Siza: Meaning, Action and Place*. New York: Routledge, 2025, 4.

“Observe the play of shadows, learn the game... Precise shadows, clear cut or dissolving. Projected shadows, sharp. Projected shadows, precisely delineated, but what enchanting arabesques and frets. Counterpoint and fugue. Try to look at the picture upside-down or sideways. You will discover the game.”<sup>20</sup>

Written on two pages, these words are printed together with two photographs of Ronchamp. When the part Childs quotes is located in this context, another interpretation is possible, a much more economical one. The photographs are two episodic images with very particular angles, distancing the building as a whole, and framing a gaze, a plasticity that is dominant throughout one's first-person experience of Ronchamp. This interpretation is more economical as it fits the overall structure of Le Corbusier's monogram on Ronchamp. For example the model is photographed before some paintings of Le Corbusier as its background.<sup>21</sup> The emphasis is on form making and plasticity as the medium for exploring particular states of mind: lived experiences that Le Corbusier explored in both painting and architecture.

There are other evidences that weakens Childs's interpretation of the plan of Ronchamp as a figure indicating certain meanings within the frame of Le Corbusier's cosmology. For example, the bull horn as a motif frequently occurs in Le Corbusier's late works. It may have certain metaphysical meanings for the architect which are beyond our access. However, every time he employs the motif, Le Corbusier does it architecturally, transforming the form into an architectural entity that is part of the architectural experience, either enhancing a certain verticality or sectional quality that playfully rethinks volumetry and light. Le Corbusier's symbolism, whatever that may be, operates at the level of lived architectural experience, and is transformed into concrete forms with particular experiences. He is very clear on plans, and dedicates an entire chapter to 'the illusion of plans' in his *Towards A New Architecture*:

“Arrangement is the gradation of aims, the classification of intentions.”

“Man looks at the creation of architecture with his eyes, which are 5 feet 6 inches from the ground. One can only consider aims which the eye can appreciate and intentions which take into account architectural elements. If there come into play intentions which do not speak the language of architecture, you arrive at the illusion of plans, you transgress the rules of the Plan through an error in conception, or through a leaning towards empty show.”<sup>22</sup>

### Ronchamp as 'Mannerism'

James Stirling in his essay *Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and The Crisis of Rationalism* gives a very detailed outline of his actual experience of the building not only in terms of the relations between different architectural elements, and materials and techniques of construction, but also of related experiential qualities.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Le Corbusier. *The Chapel at Ronchamp*. London: The Architectural Press, 1957, 38-39.

21. *Ibid*, 104.

22. Le Corbusier. (1923). *Towards a New Architecture*. Oxford: Butterworth, 1989, 177.

23. Stirling, J. (1957). "Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp and the Crisis of Rationalism", Le Corbusier in

His comments demand discussion. For example, he draws a parallel between the Mannerist period of the Renaissance and Ronchamp, and interprets the building as "a derision of modern movement in a state when its vocabulary can no longer be extended."<sup>24</sup> More importantly, he sees a similarity between Ronchamp and Erich Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower. Even though he underlines that "but only inasmuch as the walls and roof are fused into one expression,"<sup>25</sup> together with his other comments, the appearance of Einstein Tower in his reading of Ronchamp indicates an association of the two buildings in their plastic qualities. Stirling sees in Ronchamp a sculptural expression consumed at once without any lingering intrigue:

"The sensational impact of the chapel on the visitor is significantly not sustained for any great length of time and when the emotions subside there is little to appeal to the intellect, and nothing to analyze or stimulate curiosity. This entirely visual appeal and the lack of intellectual participation demanded from the public may partly account for its easy acceptance by the local population."<sup>26</sup>

Ronchamp and the Einstein Tower are not similar. They don't belong to the same category of plasticity. Every move in Ronchamp, every curve, every angle, etc., is calibrated for human existence from within the architectural form. Rather than being a large scale sculpture, like the Tower, where the forms are generated from and adjusted to a single expression for vision, Ronchamp looks at the occupying human body and not only sight but its spatial and temporal experiences as a whole as the generator of its forms. The Einstein Tower can be seen as mannerism as early as 1920's, a search for formal expression as an end in itself. Ronchamp can only be seen as mannerism within a very narrow definition of modern architecture tied to certain geometries and organizational principles. Beyond this, it is the culmination of a long research on architectural form and design by Le Corbusier as a means of reflection on the human existence. For me, the acceptance of local people testifies to this. Built as a pilgrimage chapel, the building resonates with the pilgrims in ways an architecture of formal structural autonomy, 'the intellectual' architecture of Stirling, cannot grasp.<sup>27</sup>

Other authors highlight the design process of Ronchamp as Le Corbusier immersed himself in books on the rituals of the Catholic religion and gathered information about the tradition of pilgrimage associated with the place.<sup>28</sup> It is clear that Le Corbusier achieved an essential experiential quality for the rituals without falling into a game of symbolism of forms. In response to the question why they had chosen Le Corbusier as the architect for the Monastery of La Tourette, a member of the community explains:

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Perspective, P. Serenyi (Ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975: 64-67.

24. Ibid, 65.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid, 66.

27. "Between transformation and creation, architecture activates the emergence of space-time, enabling us to orient ourselves. In the process of configuring, architecture makes the world, not as some exceptional divine operation that took place at the beginnings of time and thus is forever frozen in place, but as an ever-critical formal notice for human beings to exist." Younes C. *Architectures of Existence: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2024, 1.

28. Baker, G. H. *Le Corbusier: An Analysis of Form*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984, 212.

“Why? For the beauty of the monastery to be born of course. But above all for the significance of this beauty. It was necessary to show that prayer and religious life are not bound to conventional forms, and that harmony can be struck between them and the most modern architecture, providing that the latter should be capable of transcending itself.”<sup>29</sup>

If we see architecture as a problem of vocabulary, Ronchamp is indeed an epitomization of 'imperfectionism' for 'modern movement'.<sup>30</sup> Its public acceptance on the other hand showcases that the intellectual discussions within architecture about form, elements, etc. may very well miss architecture as a lived phenomenon in the overall texture of culture.<sup>31</sup>

### Ronchamp's Origins

"It stands, so to speak, only for itself and in itself. Now this is decisive for dealing with the question at hand concerning the intention of the author. When it comes to a work of art, it could be said that the intention has, so to speak, "gone into" the work, and can no longer be sought behind it or before it. This sharply limits the value of all biographical insights related to a work of art, as well as those associated with the history of its origins. Works of art are detached from their origins and, just because of this, begin to speak-perhaps surprising even their creators."<sup>32</sup>

Daniele Pauly, in her chapter *The Chapel of Ronchamp as an Example of Le Corbusier's Creative Process*,<sup>33</sup> sets out to explain Ronchamp through the process of its design, tracing Le Corbusier's references as precursors for its form. Pauly differentiates between implicit and explicit sources that play part in the generation of Ronchamp.<sup>34</sup> The implicit sources are suggested to reveal an unconscious process of association belonging to the incubation period of the project. For instance, Pauly claims that the south wall of Ronchamp with its thickness and the articulation of the openings has its origin in one of the local architectures of northern Africa which Le Corbusier has absorbed into his architectural repository during a trip in 1931.<sup>35</sup> The explicit sources, on the other hand, as Pauly explains, are the ones Le Corbusier himself refers in the design process, such as the Villa Adriana at Tivoli, which provided the solution for light penetration into the side chapels of Ronchamp; the

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29. Ibid.

30. Stirling, J. (1957). "Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp and the Crisis of Rationalism", *Le Corbusier in Perspective*, P. Serenyi (Ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975, 65.

31. "Engaging the encounter in discourse without losing its immediacy is germane. The assumption here is that architecture is encountered circuitously, through people and things that are caught in its frame. Such knowing is mediated by peripheral subjects/objects, modes of occupancy and experience which sit outside architecture's disciplinary frame or its orbits of dissemination. Such knowing takes seriously the pull of serendipitous encounters." Chee L. *Architecture and Affect: Precarious Spaces*. London: Routledge, 2023, 4.

32. Gadamer, H. G. (1989). *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer – Derrida Encounter*. D. P. Michelfelder, R. Palmer (Eds.). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, 123.

33. Pauly, D. *Le Corbusier*. London: Birkhauser, 1989.

34. Ibid, 128-132.

35. Ibid, 132.

shell of a crab that became its roof; a hydraulic dam whose working mechanisms employed for collecting the rain water; or an airplane wing, which is transformed into the structure of the roof, all of which are employed as sources of solutions for different architectural problems.<sup>36</sup>

Being explicitly referred to or not, these two kinds of sources are not different in kind, and they do not have a place in the final reading of the architectural object. Any source, any memory, any biographical anecdote belong to the psychology of the design process, but they may not explain the end product. All such sources, explicit or implicit, are transformed into the unity of the architectural object. They are synthesized into systemic entities that bear very little if any at all resemblance to their original forms or functions. Tracing the genesis of an architectural object, finding out the precursors of forms and functions, illuminates the creative process and is a study well worth to undertake as a psychological etude. But when it comes to understanding the architectural object as a unified experience in the lived space of culture, such genesis of form, even when available and accurate, bears not much fruit. It makes architecture an autonomous formal endeavor, as if the architectural experience is a function of vocabulary, not different from linguistic experience.

Eco makes a distinction between textual strategy as a linguistic object and the creative process as "the story of the growth of that textual strategy."<sup>37</sup> Internal textual coherence as textual strategy is not its biographical story of growth and coming into being. Any hermeneutic unity, whatever goes into its making, only becomes itself when it transforms its history in its own systemic unity. It is not a historical assimilation of parts or a collection of things, its claim to meaning comes from its own systemicness, its hermeneutic energy. And indeed Ronchamp resists such an analysis for the origins in the sense that the crab shell is not the crab shell anymore but the roof with its unique form; every predecessor has transmuted into something different from its original and has a new meaning in a different system of references that is the irreducible hermeneutic unity that we experience. Neither the crab shell, nor the other precursors mentioned by Le Corbusier himself or suggested by interpreting authors have a place in Ronchamp. They have their places in the creative design process and an analysis of the project's genealogy may be appraised as an attempt to decipher the creative procedure. But they cannot be part of a reading of the work strictly understood as the experience of an architectural object in the concreteness of here and now. When interpreting an architectural work becomes a reading of the genealogy of the object, it bypasses the experiential unity of the new meaning claim of the object and reduces the work to a collection of known things and earlier meanings.

Podro underlines that "in the case of many major works, we have no idea of the immediate sources upon which the artist drew."<sup>38</sup> And giving the example of Brunelleschi's augmented column motif, which has numerous anticipations, used in Santo Spirito he suggests: "what concerns us is the way the device is used in the context of Brunelleschi's building."<sup>39</sup> These qualities, transmitted through tradition,

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36. Ibid, 129-131.

37. Eco, U. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 85.

38. Podro, M. *The Critical Historians of Art*. London: Yale University Press, 1982, 136.

39. Ibid.

themselves are transformed into another character within another system of references which is the architectural object.

For example, the south wall of Ronchamp may have its origins somewhere in a local architecture of northern Africa, as suggested by Pauly. There are other authors ascribing different origins.<sup>40</sup> It is true that the south wall carries certain qualities transmitted through the Mediterranean domestic architecture traditions; nevertheless, it also has a unique existence in itself independent of any origins. It is what it actually is in the context of Ronchamp because of its play with the roof structure and its creation of the overall volumetry of the building. Its curve, changing elevational profile, and changing thickness revealed through the aperture system, the unique formation of the apertures with specific carving profiles, all of these create the wall's particular experience. Almost like a hugging arm, or an open invitation to the entry, its movement is unmissable. The character of light it lets in the interior, both spiritual and playful, is unmissable. None of these are explicable through any typological origins. An original reading is required to see what the wall does in its own context.

### Discussion

The associations Ronchamp evokes are numerous. Intrigued by its forms, many authors aimed at pinning down the experience of the building in terms of some architectural or spiritual reference:

“Making a comparison between Ronchamp and a megalithic tomb, (John) Alford argued that the chapel ‘can best be understood as a symbolic fortress and tomb’, and characterized it as a ‘fortress...against death.’ He also recognized the chapel visual affinity to a ship, calling it ‘a ship of life’.”<sup>41</sup>

“Ronchamp may be viewed as the summation of the human predicament, as the ship of life of the transient pilgrim, or as the fortress against death for the weary and the restless- a fortress which inevitably becomes his tomb.”<sup>42</sup>

“.....- in part Maltese tomb, in part Ischian vernacular, its half-cylindrical side chapels, top lit through spherical cowls and oriented towards the trajectory of the sun, serve to remind one that this Christian site was once the location of a sun temple.”<sup>43</sup>

“The whitewashed rendering is applied to the interior as well as to the exterior and the openings scattered apparently at random over the south and north walls splay either inwards or outwards, similar to the reveals of gun-openings in coastal fortifications.”<sup>44</sup>

“The transition into the interior at Ronchamp is dramatic. One enters an otherworldly cave, a catacomb.”<sup>45</sup>

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40. See Providencia P. "Ronchamp, South Wall". *Joelho Revista de Cultura Arquitectonica*. (2022): 21-44 for a thorough study on archetypal origins for example.

41. Serenyi, P. *Le Corbusier in Perspective*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975, 8.

42. Ibid.

43. Frampton, K. (1980). *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992, 228.

44. Curtis, W. J. R. *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*. London: Phaidon Press, 1995, 65.

45. Ibid, 177.

“The inside / outside idea is brought to a crescendo which conveys the feeling of an Early Christian gathering in a landscape, while touching on the artist’s private agenda of a mystical cult of nature.”<sup>46</sup>

“...there is the idea of the ‘deep grotto’, rendered by the effects of soft, round masses that surround the observer and give a sense of reassurance.”<sup>47</sup>

These readings of Ronchamp reveal similar associative processes occasioned through their own experience of the building. It is evident that Ronchamp with its unique form initiates a reaction of associative thinking which consequently leads to a process of ascribing meanings. All these interpretations seem plausible in their associations; moreover, they all belong to Ronchamp as an architectural object for they belong to the individual architectural experiences. These associative explanations for the particular experiences, while exemplifying the architectural experience by multiplying its possible psychological references, may not be sufficient or even necessary in the sense of understanding the particular character of the building. While they may point to possible source experiences, the way the building constructs its unique experience is a synthesis beyond any of those sources. The architectural act is a significant transformation of all of its sources into a new unity. This new unity may reverberate into a 'Netherworld', as Gregotti put it in his essay on design process,<sup>48</sup> and it may play with known or unknown memories. Nevertheless, none of these sources, memories in their singularity is sufficient or even necessary to explain the new unity. The synthesis overrides all the sources in its unique transformations.

The textual/hermeneutic unity of the architectural act can only be understood within its lived experience; and this experience, while it may reverberate into language in terms of various psychological ramifications, nevertheless is indescribable in language in its uniqueness and fullness. Any explanatory framework is bound to fall short of grasping the first person phenomenal experience, as it would be a categorical reduction; placing a particular in its singularity into a domain of similarities - a family of resemblances. It will be reducing an intuition to its closest meaning form, which is nevertheless a conceptual domain.

Cassirer significantly points to a quality in great artists: "in actuality, the particular manner in which the work of art is expressed belongs not only to the technique of construction of the work but also to its very conception; Beethoven's intuition is musical, Phidias's intuition is plastic, Milton's intuition is epic, Goethe's intuition is lyric."<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Le Corbusier's intuition is architectural. The significant effort performed by Le Corbusier through his architecture exemplifies an architectural intuition that transforms not only the knowledge carried through traditions of architecture but all kinds of objects, from animals and plants to machines and other natural formations in new phenomenological syntheses. His paintings, sculptures, and buildings, all resonate with a keen eye / feel on how form performs in various experiential modalities and this research culminates in his architecture in an occupied spatio temporality. His late architectural work from Ronchamp to La Tourette, to

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46. Ibid.

47. Pauly, D. *Le Corbusier*. London: Birkhauser, 1989, 130.

48. Gregotti, V. *Inside Architecture*. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996, 90-94.

49. Cassirer, E. (1960) *The Logic of the Humanities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, 205.

posthumously built Saint-Pierre in Firmini are among the rare great works of architecture that exemplify an unmissable reflection on human existence. Rather than trying to understand these in some biographical metaphysics, as in the case of Childs; or within the narrow vocabularies of histories of architecture, as in the case of Stirling; or through some genealogy, as with Pauly, I believe we need to learn them through their lived experiences. For me, in architecture, the only tool we have to get close to the very intuition of the work is drawing and sketching: reenacting the architectural act while we draw; making sense of the object in the particular temporality of our act of drawing. We need to sit down and sketch, sketch after sketch. We need to redraw and rethink their plans, sections, re-render their materiality, textures, colors, light. We need to listen to them again and again in their unique presences as great works of art without feeling a need to categorically understand them.

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